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SUBJECT: President's Cairo Speech -- Adding Zest to Muslim Outreach

¶1. Summary. Muslim outreach has been one of the Mission's priorities. Reaching out to Muslim academies in Nairobi and regular contact work in Kenya's Muslim areas -- the coast and northeast particularly -- has been central to the Mission's public diplomacy efforts. The Embassy amplified the impact of the President's June 4 Cairo speech by inviting Somali and Kenyan Muslims to view it in the Embassy and participate in a panel discussion led by the Ambassador.

Both the media and public reacted very positively to the speech. The Ambassador then traveled to Mombasa on June 22 to engage with Muslim and civil society leaders and youth. On June 25 - 27, Mission officers visited Muslim communities in western Kenya. The President's speech reinforced the Mission's ongoing Muslim outreach and has become a reference point for Kenyan Muslims. We are continuing these outreach efforts. End summary.

Historic Moment

¶2. All five Kenyan television stations and most FM radio stations covered the President's June 4 Cairo speech live. The Mission attempted to maximize the speech's impact by organizing a viewing, which over 80 Kenyan and Somali Muslim leaders, Imams, Muslim academy teachers and students, and civil society and NGO members attended. The audience reacted enthusiastically whenever the President made reference to passages in the Koran and contributions made by Muslims. After the speech, the Ambassador led a 90-minute panel discussion. On the panel, in addition to the Ambassador, were a Kenyan MP, an Imam from Nairobi's main Jamia Mosque, and two Somali political analysts.

Immediate Reaction: A New Beginning for All

¶3. The immediate reaction to the speech was positive and enthusiastic. During the lively and, at times, emotional panel discussion, the most frequent comment by the participants was that finally, there could be a new beginning. Many noted the President's "courage" and "candor." Kenyan MP Amina Abdalla suggested that the new beginning should be for both sides. She challenged Kenyan Muslims to reflect on their role in fostering the problems that have troubled Muslims' relations with the rest of the world. Ambassador of Somalia to Kenya Ali Mohamed Nur echoed her sentiment, saying that "In Somalia, we are all Muslims, yet there is no peace. We need to cultivate peace. Muslims need to re-examine themselves." The participating SUPKEM (Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims) leaders were more restrained in their comments. However, they welcomed the speech as a first step toward real rapprochement, but emphasized the need for follow-up real action by the U.S.

¶4. During the discussion, a few contentious points emerged: the

Israel-Palestinian conflict, where many alleged "blind" support for and "preferential" treatment of Israel by the U.S.; the U.S.'s "consistent" post-9/11 portrayal of Muslims as terrorists; and the Somali quagmire, which the U.S.'s "bad" policy had ushered in. SUPKEM's Deputy Chairman, Abdullahi Kiptanui, argued that as long as the U.S. continued to side with Israel, Muslims of the world would not take the President's overture to them seriously. The Ambassador frankly addressed these comments.

Full Court Media Engagement

15. After the panel discussion, the Ambassador reinforced the President's messages with the media that were present. The Ambassador also participated in a panel discussion on Mombasa's major Muslim radio station, Radio Rahma with that city's Muslim leaders. Post distributed the speech to all media, both Kenyan and international, based in Nairobi, as well as to Muslim academies. We also distributed the speech through the Mission's extensive contact database.

Reflecting on Kenya's Own Woes

16. The print media coverage focused on Kenyan Muslims' call for "action" that would make the President's words believable. Many emphasized Kenya's need for reforms and a new beginning. Letters to the editor in the print media were particularly telling. Several contrasted the American and Kenyan leaderships, noting that U.S. leaders embraced change and were making efforts to integrate peoples of different shades, nationalities and creeds, while their Kenyan counterparts were engaging in endless power games, and driving

wedges between different tribes for their political gains.

Continuing to be the Topic

17. The speech figured prominently in morning and evening talk shows for several weeks after its delivery. The East Africa website said that "Most Muslims feel that Islam and Muslims have been demonized in America and Europe and they are essentially denied the right to practice their faith freely in those countries." Muslim FM stations such as Iqra in Nairobi, and Radio Salaama and Rahma in Mombasa returned to the speech regularly, encouraging the U.S. government to demonstrate its seriousness with concrete action. Some radio commentaries urged the U.S. to pressure Arab states to democratize and to promote women's rights in the Middle East. A quick survey among the media and public a month after the speech was delivered showed that the speech was still a current topic, not just in the media but among ordinary Kenyans.

Reaching out to Kenya's Muslim Belt

18. The Ambassador visited Mombasa on June 22 to engage with Muslim leaders and youth. In a one-hour interview with Mombasa's top FM station, Radio Baraka, the Ambassador stressed a new beginning based on mutual respect and common interests. The Ambassador hosted a working lunch for 20 Muslim leaders. The participants welcomed the proposed new partnership. They voiced the following concerns:

- Stereotyping of the Muslim population
- Discrimination and marginalization of Muslims in Kenya
- Harassment of Muslims by the Kenyan government
- The Kenyan government's anti-terrorism policy, which systematically affects the Muslim population negatively
- Funding restrictions on Muslim organizations
- Last-minute cancellation of Delta direct flights as a sign of lack of trust between the U.S. and Kenya
- Kenya, in particular Mombasa, as the dumping ground for Somali pirates

The Muslim leaders encouraged expanded engagement between Muslim

civil society organizations and the Embassy to improve already extensive communication. They also recommended that the Embassy consider more exchange programs for the Muslim population.

¶9. The Ambassador also called on the Chief Kadhi. The Chief Kadhi termed the President's speech a positive step and praised its non-confrontational nature. He requested the Ambassador to assist in lifting the funding restrictions on Muslim organizations. Expressing concern for recruitment efforts by al-Shabaab in Kenya, the Chief Kadhi requested assistance in promoting dialogue among young Muslims and strengthening ties between the Embassy and coastal Muslim youth organizations.

¶10. The highlight of the visit was an open-air town-hall meeting which the Ambassador conducted with over 1000 youth. The consensus was that the speech was a good beginning which they welcomed, and they would be waiting for the U.S.'s concrete action. Several youth stressed that the way forward was via resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Many criticized the U.S.'s "wrongdoings" in the past which contributed to the characterization of Muslims as terrorists. They were particularly emotional about the alleged collaboration between the U.S. and Kenyan governments to crack down Muslim organizations. According to them, while criminal youth groups like the Mungiki thrive without police interference, the Kenyan government, supported by the U.S., continued to harass Muslim youths on the coast. The Ambassador discussed these issues extensively and made clear the U.S. Government's commitment to assist Kenya in its reform efforts.

Pockets of Muslim Communities

¶11. Public diplomacy officer visited western Kenya June 25-27. In villages in the Kendu Bay area where the Muslim side of the President's family came from, she was told that a cheering crowd watched the speech. An Imam recounted the experience, saying, "It was an odd sight to see Muslims cheering an American President. We had not seen that for such a long time." In this Luo land, where President Obama cannot do anything wrong, the reaction to the speech was overwhelmingly positive. The only discontent came from the perception that the U.S. focused its Muslim outreach programs too much on the coast. At an open-air session with over 700 students of a mixed-faith school, we covered the main points of the President's

speech. A discussion of equal opportunities for girls produced questions on women's rights in traditional societies.

Continuous Nurturing

¶12. Muslim outreach has been and remains a Mission priority. Although Muslims represent less than 12 percent of the population and are considered to be "moderate," reaching out to them is important, especially with Somalia so close and extremism making its presence felt in Kenya. The Mission plans to expand its Muslim outreach programs both in Nairobi and other parts of Kenya. We are also planning to bring American Muslim scholars and religious leaders to speak to Muslim youth.
Ranneberger